Sir John Willison

One of Bob's Best Folktales

Jokes



When Sir John Willison, editor of the Toronto Evening News, opened a strange little newspaper mysteriously left on his desk, he choked a cry of excitement. For there, staring up at him from the front page, was a story which began:

"A pleasant banquet was tendered by the Calgary Board of Trade last week to Mr. Peter McGonigle of Midnapore, on the occasion of his release from the Edmonton Penitentiary, where he had spent some time trying to live down a conviction for horse stealing. Quite a number of prominent citizens were present, and the songs, toasts and speeches, passed off with all the eclat possible on such short notice. Letters of regret were read from Lord Strathcona, Earl Grey, Premier Rutherford, Joseph Seagram, W. F. Maclean, Rev. John McDougall and others."

Now Sir John was Canadian correspondent for one of the big London dailkes. He realized right away that such a thing as a Canadian High Commissioner sending congratulations to a convicted horse thief, was news. Especially in London. Sir John hurriedly wired an account of the story to his paper in London, and the fun began.

For you see, Peter McGonigle was Bob Edwards' personal property -- a purely mythical character conceived by Edwards as a butt of all the jests for which he couldn't find a living target. Peter McGonigle was well known in Alberta; indeed he was one of the famous characters of the west. The banquet on the occasion of his release from the Penitentiary, served to introduce Peter to the world.

For when Lord Strathcona in London casually picked up his favorite paper, this is what he saw:

"Lord Strathcona's letter was typical of the general sentiment, saying, 'I regret exceedingly that I shall be unable to attend the McGonigle banquet, but my sympathies go out to your honored guest. The name of Peter McGonigle will ever stand high in the roll of eminent confiscators. Once long ago, I myself, came near achieving distinction in that direction, when I performed some dexterous financing. In consequence, however, of stocks going up instead of down, I wound up in the House of Lords.'

"Joseph Seagram's affecting letter of regret said: 'Though unable to be with you in the flesh, my spirit is with you. Wishing McGonigle all luck in his next venture.'

"It was a sumptuous banquet, and as the walnuts, prunes and wine came on, cigars were lit, and Mayor Emerson of Calgary,

proposed the toast to the King. His honor expressed satisfaction in his Majesty's reign, insisting indeed that he was as good a King as could be got for the money. He did not believe that the time was yet ripe for the British Empire to be ruled by a commission, as this had been tried in Calgary with poor satisfaction. He was quite agreeable that the King should remain on his throne to the end of his term.

"The toast to the Army and Navy was ably responded to by Mayor Charlie Fisher, Speaker of the House. In graphic words he sketched the careers of great soldiers from Julius Caesar to Major Walker, pointing out the tactical blunders of Napoleon, and criticizing in caustic language Nelson's clumsy handling of his ships at Trafalgar. He turned merciless light on Von Moltke and wound up with a glowing tribute to the Alberta Light Horse. He resumed his seat amid thunderous applause.

"R. J. Hutchings, replying to the toast to the Great West, said: 'I presume this toast has special reference to the firm with which I have been connected. I am proud to say that the guest of the evening is endowed with a marvellous sense of discrimination. Even in that moment of abstraction, when he abstracted the horse, he selected one of our magnificent sets of single harness from the owner's stable and moved the animal along those lines. I earnestly trust that

Mr. McGonigle whose pallid countenance shows the effect of his residence in Edmonton will soon be able to resume his chosen avocation. Before sitting down, I might perhaps mention that a company is being formed to harness the Kananaskis Falls, and our firm is hopeful of getting a little business out of it.'

"Mr. C. W. Rowley, manager of the Bank of Commerce, then obliged with his great song, Ye Banks and Brays.

"Mr. Rowley spoke aptly, saying: 'As you are all aware, our guest has been for some time most hospitably entertained by His Majesty in his Edmonton shooting box, where he had the honor of meeting our talented fellow townsman, Mr. Callahan, who is sought after everywhere, and our young Mr. Wilson, the Macleod chicken fancier. This district is splendidly adapted for gentlemen of Mr. McGonigle's pursuits owing to the persistent reduction of our police force.' (Tremendous cheers.)

"Mr. Matt MacAulay, the hospitable host of His Majesty's shooting box, rendered Abide With Me, with deep feeling. His rich staccato voice, however, would be none the worse for a little sandpapering. Messrs. Heibert and Robertson, the sweet warblers, then sang their favorite duet, O That We Two Were Haying, followed by the encore, Okotoks the Gem of the Ocean.

"Mr. McGonigle's rising was the signal for vociferous applause. It was fully ten minutes before the honor guest, who was visibly affected, was allowed to proceed. He then said he was willing to let the dead bury its dead. The horse in question had died shortly after he was parted from it. Had it not been for the ignorance of his lawyer, he might have been acquitted for the horse he stole was not a horse all all, but a mare. This point was overlooked at the trial. The speaker paid high tribute to the hospitality of his Edmonton host, Mr. MacAulay. But he lamented that in spite of the number of bars on the premises there was nothing of an enlivening nature to drink. In conclusion he asked that a silent toast be drunk to the memory of the dead horse."

Lord Strathcona wasted no time. He uttered a howl both loud and long, grabbed his telephone and got the London editor on the wire. What he said to the editor makes no difference. It is enough to know that in a very few moments a cable was on its way to Sir John Willison.

Sir John, possibly feeling proud of "being on the spot with news" was equally dismayed by the editor's cable. For Sir John was of the East, and the East, notoriously behind the west in matters of pure humor, had never heard of Peter McGonigle. So Sir John sent a hot wire to the Mayor of

Calgary, and learned to his amazement, that the whole affair was a hoax.

What Sir John did then is not known. What Lord Strathcona did is known and has furnished the west with many a laugh.

Having never heard of western humor, Lord Strathcona wasted no time. He got his battery of London solicitors and prepared to deal the author of this outrage a death blow. Consultation was heated and long. At length another cable was humming toward Calgary. This time the wire was for Senator Lougheed, a well known Calgary lawyer, and related by marriage to Strathcona. The wire said: "Begin civil and criminal actions at once!" and named the culprit and mentioned the battery of legal talent in London standing by ready to back the Senator up.

Senator Lougheed, in his turn, was amazed, for he was a westerner and understood the humor of the west. He sent a cautious reply to London, hinting that the whole matter was a joke.

The London solicitors, however, had never heard of such a thing as a joke. "Does not the King's writ run in your territory?" they screamed. "Toss the beggar in jail!"

Lord Strathcona kept inquiring whether Edwards was yet in prison, and wanted to know why when informed that he was

not.

Senator Lougheed, wise in the ways of the west, knew that if action were brought against Edwards, it would end in a downright farce. Edwards knew this, too, and in the highest glee went about saying: "Let 'em sue me. I'm ready for 'em!"

Senator Lougheed finally succeeded in persuading Lord Strathcona to call off his dogs. The legal side of the affiar ended then, but the west is still laughing.